

Livy 30.12–16: Masinissa becomes a Roman

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The main subject of Livy book 30 is the Roman commander Scipio's successful campaigning in Africa and the Romans' ultimate defeat of Hannibal and the Carthaginians. But early in the book, Livy turns away from the sieges, battles, and diplomatic manoeuvres of this stage of the war to recount something close to a love story.

Scipio's ally, the exiled Numidian king Masinissa, impulsively falls in love with Sophoniba, the wife of Syphax, the man who had expelled Masinissa and seized the throne of Numidia for himself. Letting his passion get the better of him, Masinissa swears to protect Sophoniba from judgment at the hands of the Romans. His love proves as tragic as it was sudden: he can only fulfil his pledge to protect her by helping her to commit suicide, and he is lost in his despair.

So why does Livy digress to tell his readers something so incidental and tragic? The only connections between the main narrative and this love story are indirect: Sophoniba is a Carthaginian, the daughter of the general Hasdrubal, and her husband Syphax is fighting alongside the Carthaginians after having switched his allegiance to them from Scipio. The actual tragedy has no direct bearing on the course of the war. Why then does Livy tell it in detail, crafting dialogue for the main characters and describing their feelings at every step? Simply put, Livy used this episode to illustrate how personal self-discipline translates into public, specifically military and political, success.

Love hurts

The story begins when Masinissa and Scipio's aide Laelius capture the city of Cirta, Syphax's capital, and Sophoniba becomes Masinissa's prisoner. The battle itself is dispensed with in two sentences, and the focus shifts immediately to Masinissa's reinstatement as king of the Numidians. As he enters the palace, Sophoniba recognizes his royal status from his weaponry and clothing and throws herself at his knees. Calling on that royal status, which had so recently been hers, her current position as a suppliant, the Numidian name that he shares with Syphax, and the deities of the palace – in short anything that might move Masinissa – she begs for his protection and says that she prefers to entrust herself to one born, like herself, in Africa, rather than to Roman foreigners. Her entreaties turn seductive, and Masinissa is captivated. Desperate to keep her under his protection, the Numidian marries Sophoniba on the spot. When Laelius in turn arrives, he is appalled and tries to drag Sophoniba from the wedding bed to her proper place with the other captives, including her first husband, Syphax. Masinissa prevails on him to refer the matter to Scipio.

At this point the focus moves to Syphax. His arrival at the Romans' camp is likened to the spectacle of a triumph, and his former greatness is recollected. The shift, however, is momentary only. Prominent in the reasons for his fame are his marriage to a daughter of the Carthaginian commander Hasdrubal, i.e. Sophoniba, and his expulsion of Masinissa. Further, when Syphax and Scipio converse, the marriage to Sophoniba once more comes to the fore. Syphax asserts that he lost his head not when he went to war with the Romans, but when he took a Carthaginian wife into his home. Even worse, the nuptial torches

burned down his house; his wife enticed him into taking up arms against a personal guest and friend (Scipio); and his sole source of comfort is that she has brought the same insanity upon his greatest enemy, Masinissa. The fact that Masinissa is neither wiser nor of firmer character than Syphax, but in fact more foolish because of his youth, will mean that he will follow her lead even more thoughtlessly and immoderately.

Scipio is alarmed. After he publicly congratulates both Laelius and Masinissa for their conquest of Numidia, he takes the latter aside and prompts him to think of the virtues in his own character that initially led Masinissa to join his side. Then Scipio cautions him that men of their youth have more to fear from pleasures of the flesh than weapons of the enemy. He reminds him that Syphax and everything connected to him, including his wife, are now war prizes of the senate and people of Rome. Masinissa must not let a single vice undo all his virtues nor should he spoil his excellent record by an error weightier than its source.

Masinissa grasps Scipio's meaning and asks that insofar as circumstances permit, he be allowed to uphold his promise not to let Sophoniba come under anyone else's power. He retires to his tent to lament, but his groans are audible to those outside. Summoning a trusted servant who keeps poison in case his master should need to commit suicide, Masinissa has him deliver it to Sophoniba; and she, after directing the servant to tell Masinissa that she would have died a better death had she not married on the day of her funeral, drains the cup, impassive to the end. All this is reported to Scipio. To counteract Masinissa's grief, he summons him before the tribunal, lauds him again, and awards him the symbols of a triumph – a golden crown and cup, an ivory chair and sceptre, an embroidered toga and a tunic embroidered with palms – announcing that the Roman people considers Masinissa alone of all foreigners worthy of triumphal regalia, material indications of the Romans' highest honour.

A lesson in self-restraint

Why does the tragic story of Masinissa and Sophoniba intrude so grossly into what is essentially a military success: the defeat of Syphax and conquest of Numidia? The answer lies in the very way Livy tells it: for all the emphasis on the Numidian king, the episode is a lesson in what it means to be a Roman. Sophoniba's successful seduction of Masinissa is prefigured earlier in the war, in an episode from Scipio's campaign in Spain. In book 26, Scipio too finds himself faced with a beautiful female prisoner. He, however, resolves the situation far differently.

The story begins in a similar way. After Scipio's conquest of Carthaginian Spain, there are numerous prisoners, including a young captive whose beauty turns heads wherever she goes. Upon questioning her, Scipio learns that she is engaged to one Allucius, a Celtiberian prince. Scipio has her parents and fiancé sent for immediately. It is Allucius, however, to whom he addresses his remarks. Invoking the natural bond between them, based on their youth, he declares that he too would like to fall in love and marry, were he not engaged on the business of the republic. He explains that he has, therefore, treated Allucius' fiancée with the respect that she would receive from her parents and in-laws and has had her guarded so that she can be given to

him inviolate and worthy of both of them. The reward for Scipio's restraint in this case is the gratitude, admiration, and loyalty of Allucius and the young woman's parents. They give him gold, which he in turn makes into a bridal gift for Allucius. Allucius subsequently returns to Scipio with 1,000 infantry and 400 cavalry. In short, faced with the temptation of a beautiful woman under his power, Scipio respects her status, restores her to it, and reaps in return a beneficial military alliance.

Being Roman

The parallels with Masinissa's initial situation when Sophoniba falls into his hands at Cirta are clear enough on their own, but Livy makes certain that they do not escape his audience. He tells the reader that when Scipio learns about Masinissa and Sophoniba, he compares the Numidian unfavourably with himself in Spain, where he did not succumb to the attractions of any woman. We are not invited, but directed, to think of Scipio's earlier behaviour and, since Scipio then goes on to remind Masinissa that it was his behaviour in Spain that led him to join him in the first place, we know too that Masinissa himself had every opportunity to model his treatment of Sophoniba on Scipio's earlier actions.

Instead of behaving like the Roman he admires, Masinissa succumbed to what Livy describes as his native susceptibility to passion. And instead of turning the situation to political or military advantage, Masinissa knowingly tries to subvert the obligations he has to Laelius and Scipio, choosing to protect the foreign woman and thereby to be disloyal to the Romans. Even Sophoniba recognizes that their marriage transgressed propriety when she condemns it before drinking the poison.

All, however, is not lost. Scipio wisely perceives Masinissa's fragile condition and, instead of rebuking him for his personal lapse of character, rewards him for his military successes. The nature of the honours Masinissa receives is important: by giving him triumphal regalia and singling him out from all other foreigners, Scipio makes him as Roman as possible. Livy concludes the episode by saying that the honours mollified Masinissa and his hope of regaining his kingdom is renewed. In short, treated like a Roman, he adopts the outlook of one.

The moral of the story is clear, and it is meant to be. In his Preface, Livy says that he wishes the reader to pay attention to the men and the morals by which Rome first acquired and then expanded its empire. Masinissa's brief romantic interlude may superficially appear to be nothing more than that, a bit of human interest in the final stages of a long and grim war. It is on the contrary both a superb opportunity for Livy to show what made Rome triumphant and a useful reminder to his readers that no part of his narrative is irrelevant to his larger purpose.

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